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U.S. seeks way to hold Marcos at arm's length

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Senior U.S. intelligence and diplomatic officials are contemplating a major policy shift to further distance the Reagan administration from the government of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, The Examiner has learned.

Policy options under consideration took shape during a meeting on the Philippines in Washington last month involving 50 representatives of government intelligence agencies, the Pentagon, State Department and the financial community.

Designed to redirect U.S. policy that in the words of one participant is "too far down the Marcos road," the meeting laid bare America's options. Among those discussed:

- Abandonment of two strategic U.S. military bases in the Philip-



Ferdinand Marcos

Policy experts feel U.S. support for him is doing more harm than good

pines. Intelligence analysts said U.S. dependents on the bases are "increasingly at risk" from anti-government insurgents.

- A proposed foreign policy speech by President Reagan that would distance the United States even further from Marcos.

- The leaking of a National Security Council report stating that U.S.

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policy was to seek the ouster of Marcos.

- Plans to send military advisers and trainers to aid Philippine anti-insurgency efforts, an idea championed by CIA analysts. Also discussed was the possibility of a coup by rebellious Filipino officers.

- Financial assistance to whatever leadership might emerge after Marcos.

Details of the three-day meeting, held Aug. 1-3 at the U.S. War College, were provided to The Examiner by sources who participated.

A State Department source said last week the meeting was "just mind-stretching. We do this from time to time." But other Washington sources involved in policy-making insisted the gathering was likely to have an impact on policy decisions. One participant called the session "far more extensive than anything in the past on the Philippines."

The Philippines, considered a strategic ally in Southeast Asia, has been beset by a growing communist insurgency, economic difficulties and political unrest.

Among those present in the policy session were Philippine experts from the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Office of Strategic Assessment and other intelligence and counterintelligence governmental groups.

Although Assistant Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz and Assistant Defense Secretary Richard Armitage appeared, major participants were behind-the-scenes shapers and implementers of U.S. policy on the Philippines.

"The purpose was to determine if the administration is going in the right direction," said one source who attended. The consensus was that the United States needed to isolate Marcos even further, and more publicly.

"We have to make it clear that while we support the Philippines, we do not support President Marcos," the source said.

The "main challenge," according to the source, would be in "changing the current perception that we support Marcos. The problem is he knows where he stands with us but he has the Filipino people believing America wants to help him."

The consensus against Marcos surprised at least one participant. "Nobody in the administration is beating the drum for Marcos anymore," the source said. "And no one thinks it does us any good to have him there."

After an agenda that included a review of economic, military and political realities in the Philippines, "there was a feeling that we've come to the end of our rope," said the source. "We hope the Filipinos find a way to get rid of him and then we'll help the one who succeeds him. We want to get things going without appearing to steer the ship."

The United States' dilemma, said another participant at the meeting, was that "we still have to support the government of the Philippines" as an existing government.

The two U.S. military bases were discussed at length as points of American vulnerability. Defense intelligence and counterintelligence experts told the group that U.S. citizens on the bases, as well as the bases themselves, "are not secure," according to one participant.

"Sooner or later Americans will become targets of terrorism," the analysts were quoted as saying. Some 100,000 Americans and Filipino dependents are "increasingly at risk" in the face of any major upsurge of anti-American feeling, analysts said. Plans to pull out U.S. dependents would also serve the purpose of sending



President Ferdinand Marcos has long enjoyed a friendly and supportive relationship with the United States, ever since the '60s with President Johnson, above, and into the '80s, with President Reagan, right



Marcos a strong no-confidence message, analysts believe.

Some participants were surprised to hear a new Pentagon position on U.S. military bases. "If the choice was between having a Philippines friendly to the U.S. or our bases" in the post-Marcos era, a participant said, "there was almost no disagreement. We'd choose a friendly Philippines and sacrifice the bases."

One Defense Department analyst remarked that "we don't want another Guantanamo" — the U.S. base in Cuba.

Intelligence and defense experts gave three other reasons why the bases might be scrapped: They are not secure from attack; Marcos may continue to use them for political leverage; and massive supplies located on the bases are susceptible to theft.

Publicly, U.S. military authorities have testified before Congress that the bases are indispensable. At the meeting, according to one source present, numerous alternative sites were discussed.

It was also agreed at the meeting that a future Reagan speech should contain much stronger language than ever before that the United States does not back Marcos alone but will support whomever Filipinos choose in the coming presidential elections.

"As long as Marcos thinks Reagan backs him, he will dismiss criticism from people like Wolfowitz or (Rep. Stephen) Solarz," said one source at the meeting. Solarz, D-N.Y., has been a frequent critic of U.S. Philippines policy.

A message could also be delivered, the meeting's participants agreed, by leaking a government document detailing a change in the administration's approach. Earlier this year, a National Security Council analysis on the Philippines, leaked to the press, stated that U.S. policy was not aimed at getting rid of Marcos.

"We discussed how that phrase could either be deleted" in the next such document leaked, according to one meeting participant, or how to assert that Marcos should step down.

The group also discussed the possibility of direct involvement of U.S. military personnel in the Philippine government's war against communist insurgents.

Some CIA officials responsible for the Philippines were "enthusiastic" in wanting to send U.S. trainers and

directors into the field to instruct Filipino soldiers, according to one participant, who objected to the idea.

"We discussed whether that would be wise and to what extent we should get involved in counterinsurgency operations. Although the CIA wanted it, the Defense Department people did not."

Ominously, the military representatives "made it clear that if we do feel U.S. military intervention is necessary" to stem the insurgency, "we won't be without plans," the participant said. "The plans exist." No elaboration was offered at the meeting.

The possibility of a Filipino military coup replacing Marcos was also "very much a topic," according to another participant, although "it was generally not thought of as a good thing."

It was also noted that a number of officers trained in the United States are being kept from advancing in the Philippine military by "overstaying" generals — close to Marcos — who are long past retirement age.

Much of the meeting was spent on the post-Marcos years. "We are already in the post-Marcos period in our policy," said one participant. A variety of those present felt the Philippines will be closer to chaos once Marcos is gone, with both opposition and Marcos party successors fragmented.

"One thing that was thought about was, if you do get rid of Marcos, how do you then use economic power to help the Philippines," one source said. "The Philippines has got to have its own plan."

It was generally agreed, according to the participant, that the United States should not appear to favor any particular opposition candidate in presidential elections scheduled for some time next year. "We know they all have warts," the source said. "But everyone hopes Cory will run." (Cory Aquino is the wife of the late opposition leader Benigno Aquino, murdered when he returned to Manila in 1983.)

Overall, one participant described himself as "embarrassed" at the lack of options presented in the meeting.

But, he said, "I came away with a good feeling that at least everyone was aware of the problems to be answered. It takes a long time for a sense of crisis to hit some of these guys. It's been quite an effort to get the Philippines up to center stage."